

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO SERIOUSLY REDUCE POVERTY? – JOSH SPRING, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE HOMELESS COALITION, IS SECOND SPEAKER IN A COMMUNITY FORUM SERIES

At the Community Issues Forum on March 10th, Josh Spring addressed the question: “Are we really serious about reducing poverty.” Spring, the Executive Director of the Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition, was the second speaker in this Forum series focused on what it would take to significantly reduce poverty in Greater Cincinnati. As the leader of a coalition that serves and advocates for homeless families and individuals, he is well suited to take on this issue.

Josh Spring began his talk by intimating that too much time and money go into studying the various aspects and phases of poverty. “Do we really need,” he asked, “exhaustive studies on the culture of poverty? Let’s get serious,” he added, “people don’t choose to live in poverty.”

What we need to be focused on, according to Spring, are major steps that would immediately lift people out of the conditions that keep them at or below the poverty line. One obvious problem that currently receives a lot of attention is the growing income inequality in our midst. While a few corporate executives are earning millions of dollars every year, there are millions of full and part time employees with wages that keep them in poverty or one pay check away from poverty. “Is it right or moral,” he queried, “for someone to work hard at a job and still be in poverty?”

“Pay everyone a living wage,” declared Spring. By “living wage,” he does not mean the current minimum wage that covers the cost of living in 1968, but a salary computed regionally that would allow an individual or family to afford decent, housing, food, health care and the other amenities for a decent and secure life.

Spring envisioned for Forum attendees a fantasy in which the CEO of Procter and Gamble, who receives \$22-million a year, and the CEO of Kroger, who receives \$13-million a year, announce their decision to provide all their employees with a living wage. Other Greater Cincinnati employers then follow their example. “This would be a huge step toward eliminating poverty in Cincinnati,” he stressed.

“Why hasn’t this happened?” Spring asked. “Too great a culture of greed currently exists,” he answered. “To question the right to make huge profits and salaries,” he continued, “is like questioning the existence of God.”

Spring doesn’t see greed diminishing anytime soon, and he advocates a grassroots campaign for greater equity led by people of good will. “We can legislate more equity and balance,” he averred. He pointed to other communities that have established minimum wage legislation that comes close to a living wage. “Our City Council has the power to set a living wage,” he explained, “and it could pass a minimum wage ordinance in a month’s time.”

The lack of affordable housing is the other factor, cited by Spring, that keeps so many families and individuals in poverty. “Over the last thirty-five years,” he said, “we have decimated our affordable housing stock in the city, and during that same period, federal housing assistance programs have been slashed by billions of dollars.” He pointed to the fact that virtually no affordable housing now exists in downtown Cincinnati.

Spring emphasized that we need more local public programs that create affordable housing. Policies exist elsewhere that require developers to set aside a percentage of their new units as affordable, and this legislative model could easily be adopted here. At present, the trend of reducing such units continues to place our low-income individuals and families at great risk, and coalitions such as Advocates For Affordable Housing and the Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition have their hands full in fighting to keep the housing we still have.

During the informal question and answer period, several people commented about the growing economic inequality in our city and country and how difficult it is to get elected public officials to focus on this dilemma. Spring responded by noting the expanded impact of money on our political system. “The fact that you have to have a barrel of money to win any legislative seat,” answered Spring, “means a government more and more controlled by the economic elite.”